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EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Democratic ideals are not known instinctively, but must be purposely taught, for an educated, informed citizenry is vital to the well-being of every democracy. The essential assumptions and values of democracy include the principle of inalienable rights, respect for certain institutions such as a representative government, an independent judiciary, the family, and the church. A democracy depends on schools which help to foster a kind of character which respects the law, is willing both to offer and accept criticism, and respects the value of the individual. When teaching about democracy, the schools need only to give the children the truth; democracy's achievements as well as its faults. Children should know the whole truth about their own countries and should know that there are systems of government that cannot be morally sanctioned. If students are given the whole truth about democracy's record and the comparable record of other political systems, they will never hesitate to stand up for democracy. (APG)

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I want to speak for just a few minutes today about an educational issue that goes beyond the confines of any one of our nation's boundaries -- and that is, the question of what democracies should teach their students about the idea of democracy itself. I believe it is a crucial time for us to be talking about this topic precisely because of the current surge of democratization that is sweeping our hemisphere. Each new election, each peaceful transition of power strengthens the trend. More and more it is becoming apparent that freedom, more than anything else, is the principle that binds this hemisphere together and gives us our common identity. It is right that we, as educators, do everything we can to celebrate and foster this trend -- if for no other reason than because history teaches us that teaching and learning truly flourish only when men and women are free.

Unfortunately, democracies are, in some respects, fragile and perishable institutions. Many of you here today have a much better understanding of this truth than some people in the United States, because you have seen this precariousness at close range. It is said on occasion that the people of the United States tend to take their liberties and rights for granted. I am sorry to say that sometimes this is true. And it is true in part because our schools in the United States have not always done the best possible job in teaching

our children why they should cherish the democratic principles they inherit.

Let me begin with a story about an incident that happened to a substitute teacher in a high school not too far away from here. This teacher asked the students in his three advanced government classes what they saw as the most significant difference between the United States and the Soviet Union.

When it came to the facts, he found that the students knew the Soviet record. They knew about the Soviet Union's form of government. But he also found that they distrusted American institutions. And when he called for a show of hands, this substitute teacher found that only two out of fifty-three students felt that the United States is a morally superior system to the Soviet Union. That is, fifty-one of fifty-three of this high school's brightest seniors saw no moral difference between the United States and a totalitarian government.

Now let me hasten to say that this kind of incident is not the norm among students in the United States. But it is a dramatic example of what can happen when children are not <u>taught</u> the differences between democracies and less worthy forms of government. It is an example of what can happen when they are not taught why they should cherish democratic ideals. Children are not born knowing these things instinctively. They do not spontaneously apprehend them. They do not imbibe them from the air. A love for democratic principles, and an understanding of why they are so important, must be taught explicitly. They must be taught explicitly in the schools

of any democracy that wishes to survive, no matter how old or new that democracy may be. They must be passed from generation to generation.

This is something that one of the fathers of my country, Thomas Jefferson, realized. Jefferson, as some of you may know, was also one of the fathers of our system of education in the United States. He knew that an educated, informed citizenry is vital to the well-being of every democracy, because democracies depend on individuals making intelligent decisions, both on election day and in the day-to-day conduct of their affairs. Jefferson therefore knew, for example, how important it is that the citizens of a democracy be literate -- an issue with which all of us in the Organization of American States are concerned. But he also knew that literacy in itself is not enough for the survival of a democracy; it is a necessary but not sufficient condition. Germany, after all, was one of the most literate and educated societies in the world when the Nazis came to power.

Jefferson, in listing for the citizens of his day what he saw as the fundamental aims of education in his new country, wrote that schools should teach every student

> to understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either ... To know his rights ... And, in general, to observe with intelligence and faithfulness all the social relations under which he shall be placed. To instruct the mass of our citizens in these, their rights, interests and duties, as men and citizens, [is] the object of education....

Jefferson, of course, had lived through one revolution, and he knew that liberty is a difficult commodity to obtain. But he also knew that, once acquired, it is just as difficult to hold on to freedom; the task requires, as he put it, the "diligence, candor, and judgment" of each new generation. As Goethe said, "You must labor to possess what you have inherited." It is the unique responsibility of educators in a democracy, then, to foster democratic principles in their students. Our schools must preserve, protect, and transmit a faith in those principles. For where else will our young turn for a reasoned and morally committed articulation of democracy's foundations and ideals, if not to their teachers? Our teachers must be the trustees of democracy. They must embody and profess it. The spirit of freedom rests in their hands, and they must pass it on to the future.

What are the essential assumptions and values of democratic civilization that our schools must teach? I think you will agree with me that they are things that should be common to all American nations.

I begin with certain political principles to which all democrats would subscribe. These principles travel under different names from time to time -- natural rights, individual rights, human rights -- but Jefferson called them "inalienable rights," and I don't think anyone has ever improved on that phrase. We of the democracies believe in liberty, and we believe in equality. We

believe that all men and women are entitled to civil and political equality without discrimination based on race, sex, or creed. We cherish certain rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of religion. We believe that government should be limited in its powers, and that government's essential purpose is to protect these inalienable rights of its citizens. These are things in which the citizens of all democracies believe, and our children should be taught these things in our schools.

Democratic civilization is also built around respect for certain institutions. We of the democracies believe in the crucial importance of representative government based on free, competitive elections. We believe in an independent judiciary upholding the rule of law. We affirm the centrality of the family. Here, by the way, the people of the United States especially can learn a great deal from many other nations in this hemisphere, nations where the family is valued so strongly as the first and foremost agent in the rearing of children. We all affirm the importance of church and synagogue. And in all our institutional arrangements, citizens of democracies seek to maximize individual freedom and choice.

Beliefs about institutional arrangements and political principles are not the whole of the democratic way of life. There are also certain beliefs about ourselves and our universe in which democratic civilization has put its faith. These include belief in the centrality of reason; in the spiritual nature of man; in learning, scholarship and free inquiry; in the proposition that the

human condition can be bettered; and in the moral imperative to better it.

And finally, the preservation of democracy depends on schools helping to foster in individuals certain traits of character. Jefferson wrote that schools must improve students' "morals and faculties" because he understood, as the ancient Greeks understood, that the character of the entire community ultimately depends on the character of its individual citizens. And Jefferson understood that the democratic way of life is possible only when individual citizens possess a certain kind of character. That character must be shaped, above all, by parents and family. But teachers must help, by the examples they set, and by the habits they teach -- habits like self-discipline and hard work. They must teach respect for the law, willingness to both offer and accept criticism, and the value of individualism. They must show students, in the words of Montaigne, the difference between honesty and dishonesty, ambition and greed, loyalty and servitude, liberty and license. And they must teach students not only to recognize what is best and right among these things, but to <u>love</u> what is best and right among them. For the <u>theory</u> of democracy can always exist in the statement of these absolutes, but the <u>life</u> of a democracy exists only when its citizens cherish these things and will not let them go.

These, then, are some of the principles, beliefs, and values that schools must teach if democracies are to survive. Some people will argue that to teach these things is to indoctrinate. They will argue that the notion of democracy itself implies the absence of a

set of prescribed ends in the education of free men and women. They will argue that if citizens are really to be free to make their own choices, they must not be told to love one set of values or one system of government above others -- for this is merely indoctrination, and indoctrination violates the tenets of democracy itself.

Sometimes we in the United States have been persuaded by this kind of thinking, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. Sometimes this kind of thinking has shown up in our schools. In some places in my country, some teachers have acted as though any attempt to draw meaningful distinctions between different political traditions is a judgment which all virtuous and right-minded people must sternly condemn. And so they have acted as though all forms of government and all political traditions are equally valid.

But this kind of thinking overlooks a simple fact about democracy. Yes, democracy, as a political theory, gives people the greatest possible freedom in choosing how they will conduct their affairs. <u>But democracy is not a doctrine of moral relativism</u>. There is nothing in the political theory of democracy that rules out the assertion that some forms of human behavior are more worthy than others. And there is nothing in the political theory of democracy that rules out the assertion that some systems of government are better than others. Otherwise, a devotion to democracy as a form of government would be self-contradictory. In a word, there is nothing "undemocratic" about teaching the truth. The <u>truth</u> is that democratic government is <u>morally superior</u> to totalitarian

government. Our students should be taught that truth; they will then learn to cherish it. There is a great deal of difference between teaching children the truth and indoctrinating them.

I would like to conclude by illustrating this point with another story, a story about a high school student I met a few months ago. Every once in a while I like to get back into a school and teach a class to remind myself of what my job is all about. I had gone out to San Jose, California, to teach an eleventh grade class. We were talking about the writings of James Madison, and we were discussing what it means that in a democracy, unlike other kinds of nations, liberty is the fundamental political principle. A young girl raised her hand and asked: "Mr. Bennett, do you think the United States is really a better place to live than the Soviet Union?" I said, "Yes, it is."

"Well," the young lady continued, "I'd like to know why you think so -- but maybe I shouldn't ask you because you're from the government, so probably you can't tell me the truth."

I asked, "Why don't you think I can tell the truth? Who told you this about your government? Who told you this about the people whom you elected and who are working for you?"

Well, we talked for a few minutes, and in the end I said, "Look, there are a lot of things you should study, a lot of things you should read." And I mentioned some books on United States history and Soviet history, on our government and on their government. Then I said, "But try this test for a society. It's what I call the gates test. If a society has gates, and you raise the

gates, which way do people run? Do they run out, or do they run in? And I think you know that when the Soviet Union raises its gates even a little bit -- when the Soviet Union raises its Iron Curtain -- people stampede to get out. And every time we raise the gates, people come in. Even when our gates aren't raised, people stand outside and wait as long as it takes to get in." The young lady promised me she would look into these matters.

My point is this: When it comes to teaching about democracy, we of the democracies need only give our children the truth. We should give them the truth about our achievements as well as our faults. Our children should know the whole truth about their own countries, and they should know that there are systems of government that cannot be morally sanctioned. If we give our students the whole truth about our records and the records of others, I believe they will never hesitate to stand up for democracy.

Those of you who have seen democracy struggle to life and then endeavor to survive know, perhaps better than anyone else, that the things I have talked about today must be done in our schools throughout the Americas if we are to transmit the democratic heritage to our children. If it can continue unabated, I believe that the current of democracy at work in our hemisphere today could eventually go down as one of the great political movements of history. Let it never be said that this current was turned aside and lost because we did not pass on the democratic tradition to our

children. We in the New World are heirs of that tradition. As Simon Bolivar said of all Americans, "We are a special kind of human being. We have a world apart." Let us make sure our children always know the liberty for which Simon Bolivar fought. Let us teach our children to love democracy, because it alone will keep them free.